# Robert P. Jones- White Supremacy's Roots

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**SPEAKERS**

Tanner Randall, Robert P. Jones

**Tanner Randall** 00:02
We acknowledge with respect the Onondaga Nation, Fire Keepers of the Haudenosaunee, and the Indigenous people on whose land Syracuse University now stands. May the information you glean from this podcast motivate you to uphold indigenous values, protect Mother Earth, and honor indigenous treaties; white supremacy is prevalent topic in the United States, it thrashed our country in the 20th century. And now we see it's more covert and ever more presence influence today. But why do white supremacists feel they're on the top of the hierarchy? That's what we're going to explore by looking at the Doctrine of Discovery or the doctrine of Christian discovery. Welcome to the doctrine of Christian discovery. I'm Tanner Randall, your host from good faith media. We were producing this podcast at the religious origins of white supremacy conference in December of 2023, at Syracuse University in New York. This year is particularly special because it's the 100th anniversary of Johnson V. McIntosh, the Supreme Court proceeding that installed the framework of the doctrine of discovery within American government. We will be talking about the different ramifications of the doctrine of discovery and how it led to indigenous values and land being stolen as well as white supremacy and the general idea of revitalized indigenous culture. The doctrine of discovery allows a certain kind of mindset with white supremacy. It establishes the idea that there is a conqueror and a conquered, it puts the justification for people to see themselves as better than others. And in modern times, we often see the government structures are terrorized by one group deciding the social and moral implications of an entire society. So what we're going to do with our next interviewee is explore what stories we can dissect. To understand the influence of the doctrine of discovery, or, as we like to call it in this podcast, the doctrine of Christian discovery. We would like to thank our sponsors who made this podcast possible. Many thanks to the Henry Luce Foundation, Syracuse University, Indigenous Values Initiative, American Indian Law Alliance, American Indian community house, good faith media, ton of theater, and towards our common public life; we appreciate your support. I'm Tanner Randall with Good Faith Media. Our guest on this episode is Robert P. Jones. Robert is the president and founder of the Public Religion Research Institute and author of The Hidden Roots of white supremacy. I'm here with Robert P. Jones, and we're going to be discussing white supremacy and how it is interacting with the Doctrine of Discovery. Robbie, how are you?

**Robert P. Jones** 03:25
I'm great. Thanks for having me. To

**Tanner Randall** 03:27
start us off. I have been studying a lot about white supremacy and the doctrine of discovery and white supremacy changed significantly over the last few centuries. I find it more covert, but increasingly present. Maybe that's because online forums are popular and often can perpetuate different echo chambers. But in what ways does white supremacy inflate the ideas of the doctrine of Christian discovery? And where do you see its influence today? Well,

**Robert P. Jones** 03:58
as you know, my last book is called the hidden roots of white supremacy. So I named it that for a reason, because I wanted to trace it back, particularly in the American context to its inception. And how does it get here on this place? We call you know, the United States of America. And it turns out that it arrives really along with Christian explores right from Europe. And it is the you know, it is embedded really in religion and the religion that they bring to it. So, you know, one of the things that I think is not talked about that much is you know, when Columbus comes back and 1493, not 1492. But 1493. He comes back with a mandate, right? And he gets that mandate from the King and Queen of Spain. We all kind of learned about that. But what we don't learn that much about is that he has another mandate. It's a moral mandate. He explicitly asked for it and got it from the Pope, right from the head of the Western When Christian church at the time, and it was it was that moral mandate that really had the power. That said, basically, if you were European and Christian, you had the right to occupy land steel goods. And in the words of the, the doctrines and the Doctrine of Discovery, I mean, literally says, in there written out, you know, from the office of the Pope, that you have the reason to do that, and to submit their persons to perpetual slavery, right, that's just written out in the documents, it's very clear, not a wink-wink, nod-nod, a very explicit mandate that Columbus brings with him. And it comes again, from the Christian church. And really, we're still struggling here in our country, with that very idea, right? That with the superiority of European people, and Christian religion, and that word, those terms Christianity and civilization show up over and over and over again in American history, as the kind of justification for the entire transatlantic slave trade, the colonization of these lands, and the forced removal and genocide of indigenous peoples. So it's all right there, right in this doctrine of discovery that Columbus brings with him in 1493, and that all the European powers bring with them. In the wake of that. It's

**Tanner Randall** 06:20
interesting, because the roots of the Doctrine of Discovery is obviously from the Catholic Church, and the people will. But we're here this weekend for this conference because of the 100th anniversary of Johnson V. Macintosh. And that instilled it within our America's constitutional framework, which I always find bizarre, because we're a country founded on the idea of the separation of church and state. And so I guess I have a question for you of how does that kind of go from an idea that is used to colonize indigenous peoples to one that instills white supremacy or racial inferiority to other outgroups? In the United States Constitution? Yeah,

**Robert P. Jones** 07:09
well, you know, it doesn't just pop up in 1823. That's the thing. I mean, it's notable that that's where it enters us case law is at the level of the Supreme Court. But you know, before that, I mean, it's in our culture, right. So the whole ideas of manifest destiny, for example, I mean, that is, in fact, the Doctrine of Discovery, right? This right of the country to make it take over this entire for Europeans to take over this entire landmass from the ocean to ocean. That idea is again, carried in this Christian doctrine of discovery. And it's also in our founding documents. I mean, people, I think, forget that, you know, if you take the Declaration of Independence, it is there, right? There is the things that the colonists are complaining about. And we also forget that that's it is a document a statement of great democratic principles, but it's also a list of complaints to the King of England. And among those complaints, are things that are all about white supremacy, they're complaining that the king is allowing slave rebellions among the colonies, they're complaining that the king will not let them occupy more Native American lands, and they are at the mercy or they are being attacked by the merciless savages that's in the Declaration of Independence. Right. And, of course, the Constitution explicitly excludes Native Americans. It explicitly says excluding Indians not taxed, like in the document, there and also African Americans that counts them infamously as three fifths of a person and then only to increase the power of the people who own them, right. to insulate to white and slavers. So it's in our it's not inconsistent at all right, for an 1823, for us to have a Supreme Court decision that John Marshall writes, and relies on that same cultural understanding to kind of insert it into law. So, you know, the further you get into history, the more you realize, oh, this is not Johnson V. McIntosh is no anomaly, right? It's like the inevitable legal outcome of this cultural worldview.

**Tanner Randall** 09:19
I find that, you know, hard to digest sometimes is as other concepts within the Declaration of Independence, like you're saying that they were mad, the king was allowing slave rebellions or restricting their ability to encroach on indigenous land because so much of it has to do with what we are taught in school and I'm kind of alarmed by the fact that those weren't main points within my own curriculum. But that kind of brings me to my next point of or my next question of in a, you know, increasingly confrontational society, how do we approach these ideas and expose them to people without Those have different opinions completely shutting down, like how do we present that?

**Robert P. Jones** 10:05
Well, it's really challenging. I'll start by saying, I do think most people want to know the truth. And I think for my own journey, so I grew up Southern Baptists in Mississippi, right, and got very much, you know, a very one sided faults, mythic logical view of history, where, as James Baldwin put it, you know, our ancestors were always heroes, and always noble and always treated immigrants, Mexicans and Indians with and we're kind of slaves and treat everyone with care and dignity, you know that that was the mythology. And that the Civil War was the War Between the States, right, and not a war fought over slate to protect slavery. That was the kind of history that I really grew up with. And from my own journey, coming out of that kind of evangelical Christian, really Neo Confederate world, it really was a realization that I've been lied to that for me so that I can speak very personally about this. And that, like, I actually want to know the truth about our history about my own family's history. And getting clear about that has been really important. And as I've spoken around the country, I've probably been, I don't know, couple 100, you know, speaking things in the last few years, and many of them in churches, and

predominately white churches. And I am finding a pretty big appetite for them to say like, actually, we do want to have this conversation. And we do want to have this reckoning. And we don't want to just live in this kind of false world we've constructed over the centuries, I think there's an appetite. And we're at a moment in this country, a moment, are they I think we are at a moment of historical reckoning, right? Where people are realized, okay, we've been sold a bill of goods here. And it's time for us to really, really, it's the kind of maturity, it's the kind of move out of the childish world of impossible innocence, and the way we think about our past, and come to more reality and a more mature way of thinking about American history, it's really the only way, we're going to find a way to live together in a pluralistic country going forward, we certainly can't do that built on foundation of lies. And

**Tanner Randall** 12:13
I know you're a big stats guy. And I find it interesting, you know, going into those churches, it must be kind of unique each time you speak to a group of people deciding, you know, am I going to go more of like a narrative storytelling? Or am I going to kind of bring in a lot more facts and things like that. So what's that balance, like? And kind of? What are the challenges you face with creating a unique presentation for these very diverse groups?

**Robert P. Jones** 12:38
That's a great question. Yeah, to PowerPoint or not to PowerPoint tonight? That is the question. Always, and sometimes I do and sometimes I don't, I think you're right, depending on the situation. But when I say this, I'm trained as a sociologist. So one nice thing I think, that historians and sociologists have, is we've got the receipts, right? So we're not just kind of alleging things or you know, asserting things, but there's actual documentation and science, right, that we can point to. So as a sociologist, you know, I can really point to things like, well, we've been talking about this, you know, dusty, 16th century, or 15th century set of doctrines. Really, are they still around today? I mean, I'm, you know, I mean, I even I might be a little skeptical of hearing that for the first time that 500 years later, we really, that's still operative. But you know, we are able to we did public opinion surveys at the organization that runs called Public Religion Research Institute, PRRI. And we did a big national couple of national studies last year, where we asked him literally about the Doctrine of Discovery, because we wanted to see, is it still with us today or not? And we asked people, like do your rear disagree, that the United States was designed by God to be a promised land for European Christians, like we asked it straight up in the survey, and we found out that about 30% of the country agrees with that statement. So on the one hand, if you're looking at the glass half, full, you know, by a margin two to one Americans disagree and reject that idea of the doctrine of discovery. But there's a sizable minority 30% that agree with it. And then if you look at how that divides out, there are basically two groups where it's a majority, and the groups are white evangelical Protestants. That's the group I grew up in Baptist evangelicals, largely in the southeast. And self identified Republicans majorities of both of those groups today agree with that statement. So it is alive and well in some of our mainstream white Christian religious groups. And in one of our two political parties that now is the majority view so it's very much a part of the national debates, even today.

**Tanner Randall** 14:55
It's a complicated situation for me because the First Amendment, not, you know, the 12th amendment or anything like that. The First Amendment gives the freedom of religion. And it is so clear in our

framework that this country is not something that is destined for evangelicals to take over and assert their dominance. And I think that there are a lot of different situations where you can see that I know that in my own personal experience. My school system went to public school in Oklahoma, we saw those kinds of lessons being taught even in a public space. And you know, there may be transitioning out of it now, but it still is happening today, people still see the system and science take advantage of so my hope is that that's going to change and that they're going to people within that system to kind of read, secular organizations have, you know, religious practices or whatnot. But I think that, you know, on that note of kind of talking about these isolated stories, and then you can look back to larger ones, in your book, The Hidden roots of white supremacy, you talk about the Amityville tragedy. And that is an extremely well-known event and influential and brought a lot of important issues to the forefront of a lot of people's minds. But you also kind of dissect another tragedy in Minnesota, where three black men were hanged, cracked, are hot, right. But that's a relatively unknown story. And I think that when I read that, for the first time, I was shocked, because it's just another thing that is an example. And testament to the pervasiveness of racism and how deep it runs in these places that you don't hear about as much, because everybody's like, there's racism in the South. A lot of it, and it's like, well, you know, yes, but the stories that aren't well known also occur. So can you speak a little bit about kind of what, what's productive about re dissecting these more famous events? And then what is productive about going into these smaller ISIL? They're not isolated, but these smaller, relatively unknown instances?

**Robert P. Jones** 17:16
Yeah, well, so in the book, I write about three, three states, Minnesota, Oklahoma, and Mississippi, right. And in all of those settings, what I'm trying to do is hold together two histories that we usually if we learn them at all, learn them separately, right? indigenous history and history of African Americans in in those places. And so, in Mississippi, I tried to kind of tell the story, as you said, it's quite famous people around the world know the name Emmett Till. But if you had gone to Tallahatchie County, in the Mississippi Delta, where it happened as recently as the year 2000, there was literally nothing on the ground telling that story, no historical markers. No, you could not find any anything to tell you that that that's where that happened. Even though again, it people knew it around the world to make it really personal. I graduated from public school. I was the valedictorian of my class, I learned everything they asked me to learn in public school. And if you'd asked me who Emmett Till was, when I graduated high school, I could not have told you and that was 1986. Right. If you'd asked me who Medgar Evers was I could not have told you. And he died. He was assassinated nine miles from my driveway in Jackson, Mississippi, where I grew up. So I think part of it is trying to tell those stories and the story I learned nothing about to kind of keep it all on the Mississippi context was the Trail of Tears, right, and the Choctaw and Chickasaw in the creek in Mississippi. My high school mascot was the rebels, right as in Confederate rebels, right? We literally had a Confederate colonel who was our mascot, and the band played Dixie, and those confederate flag that ran up and down the field on the football team scoring touchdowns. That's my high school. Right? I go to this public high school and by the way, it was integrated half black, half white, and that's the, the imagery at my high school. And then I went to my little Baptist College right outside of town and Clinton. Mississippi Baptist College, what's our mascot? Choctaws. Right. And who do we have as a mascot? Like cartoonish Indian chief right with the big exaggerated head that ran down and when we chant when the football team scores a touchdown, scalpel, Choctaw scalpel with the little Tomahawk thing going on right? So that's the word in which I grew up and yet I knew none of the real history around this so the all these caricatures and

appropriations of this very near history to us, but without any grounding in and what really happened there and you know, as a white Christian guy growing up without any awareness of what role my people played, right in those events as they played out, really not that long ago. In this They support what I'm trying to do in each of those state places is tell the story of kind of European Christian contact with indigenous people and African Americans in place there and to try to tell those two stories together, because really, they are tied together like just to make it really plain in Mississippi. You don't get the mass importations of enslaved labor until you get the forced removal of indigenous people, right, you have to first move them out of the way to make that into farmland, right. And then you need enslaved labor to clear it all and turn it into farmland, right for the benefit of Europeans. And so we have to learn to see those histories together, which we've just not done that well.

**Tanner Randall** 20:40
There are two things in particular, I want to comment on after that. First is, you know, I've heard stories, I know that my dad grew up and went to high school that was, you know, known as the Redskins. And they did similar chance to your high school. And I grew up as it being abrasive, but kind of like you said, I was also very involved in the academic community of my high school. And still when I graduated, it was not known as the Tulsa massacre, it was still the Tulsa race, right, yeah. Which is a complete misnomer of that event. And so it's something that me that I kind of look back on, still shocked by this effort to hide and conceal the reality. And the second thing I want to touch on is with those stories of you know, you're saying that your high school mascot was the rebel and the college outside of town was the Choctaw cause, I think it's important to dissect those smaller instances that may not involve violence or anything like that show help not take those concepts are in for somebody, a person of color, it doesn't go away, it's always there. You know, it's not a headline they're seeing in the news, it's something that is seen as acceptable by a large group of people. So I think it's really important that you brought that up. There are some redeeming paths to some of these tragic events. So can you speak to what that town has kind of done to reclaim their own history? Yeah,

22:09
so you know, it's Duluth, Minnesota, I came across the story of these three African American circuits, workers that were in town for a single day, were falsely accused of assaulting a white woman, rounded up and jailed on very little evidence. And then were lynched by a mob like, and at the time, the crowd that gathered there numbered somewhere around 10,000 people. And at the time, that was a 10th, of the population of the town of Duluth. So one in 10 people in town turned out to see these three men lynched. And in the aftermath of that, let as it as happened in Tulsa, after the Tulsa race massacre, and other places of violence around the country. There's, there's just like, massive effort at forgetting, that happened in the white community and just together as a barrier. Let's never talk about it again. Let's just move on, even though no justice was ever done, there. And there was a group that got together really, in, in Duluth, and it was actually just three people it was, it was a white woman, a Latina woman, an African American man who decided, You know what, like, we need to tell this story, right, because it certainly the very small African American communities did not forget the story. There, but we need to tell the story. And it can be a way to kind of promote healing in the, in our city. And so they begin to gather, you know, support and they ended up they were just going to put a plaque there, kind of where it happened. And it turns out, they raised enough money, that they create an entire plaza, it takes the hot kind of corner, it's beautiful place. It's kind of a brick walkway, it's got a kind of freeze of the three

men with their names there. And it has all these kind of inspiring quotes against hate and for justice and unity around the around the plaza. And they did this quite early. They just like in 2003. So this is well before the Black Lives Matter movement started, I think they're the first city to actually do a public memorial to the victims of lynching there in 2003, what was significant about it is that when the Black Lives Matter movement, kind of launched and many cities across the country, were seeing demonstrations and people gathering Duluth actually had a place where people knew to go, they actually just instinctively gathered at this memorial, and the police kind of knew what was going on. And it turns out in Duluth, the piece the police chief was related to the woman who falsely accused these black men and only came to know that story because of the work of commemoration that happened. And all of that influenced the way the police even acted in Duluth right and so instead of heavy handed, you know kind of ways of kind of assisting people peacefully demonstrating they didn't have a permit. He was like, Look, I understand what's going on here. I understand the need for this. And they really kept their distance. They kept people safe. But they weren't heavy handed about it. And I think just that little example is something one had a place to go to kind of gather and to kind of talk about what was happening with George Floyd. I remember that George Floyd happened right down the road, right in St. Paul. Right. So And sorry, Minneapolis, so just down the road from Duluth. So this is a very local event for them. And even though it was happening nationwide, nationwide, but there was kind of this space, kind of almost a sacred space they had created for racial justice in the city, and I think that paid a lot of dividends for them. And, you know, I could have written really 50 chapters on one for each state, both about the horrific racial violence, but also about efforts to mend and heal from that. And I think it's these local efforts. And when I'm thinking about, like, what is what gives me hope, looking in the future, it's these local efforts of people on the ground, who decided like, you know, what are we can do better, and our community and we can tell the truth, and we can build a foundation for a better way forward for all of us.

**Tanner Randall** 26:09
Awesome. Thanks for listening to this episode of the doctrine of Christian discovery recorded at the 2023 Religious Origins of White Supremacy Conference at Syracuse University in New York. This podcast is produced in collaboration between Good Faith Media, Syracuse University, and the Indigenous Values Initiative. I'm Tanner Randall for Good Faith Media. Our executive producers are Mitch Randall of Good Faith Media Philip P. Arnold and Sandy Bigtree of the Indigenous values initiative and Adam DJ Brett Syracuse University and the American Indian law Alliance. Our producer is Cliff Vaughn and our editor is David Pang. Our music comes from Pond5. Production assistance provided by the American Indian Law Alliance. To learn more go to doctrineofdiscovery.org.